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Retired ROTC leader receives Legion of Merit

Kevin Arnold led the Claremont McKenna College program for four years.

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CLAREMONT -- He won't be wearing the sharply pressed U.S. Army uniform he wore for 26 years before last month, but Lt. Col. Kevin J. Arnold will still be a leader to the hundreds of young soldiers he's trained.

Now retired, the commander of the Army's Reserve Officer Training Corps at Claremont McKenna College was honored Tuesday with the Legion of Merit medal, one of the highest military awards given in peacetime.

He earned the honor for his four years of service at Claremont McKenna. ROTC students from 17 Southern California colleges and universities get military training through Claremont McKenna's program. Arnold was only one of two officers in the West who earned the distinction in this round of awards, said Arnold's successor, Lt. Col. Mike Murphy.

"The ROTC and the Army have truly lost an outstanding leader," Murphy said. "But the civilian sector has gained a valuable contributor."

He retired from the Army in September.

The noontime ceremony was attended by Arnold's family, about 40 ROTC students and Claremont McKenna's president, Pamela Gann.

The ROTC students stood at attention throughout Arnold's introduction, but he put them at ease when he took the podium.

"I was given the conviction of doing what is right, because it's right," Arnold said. "It wasn't always easy and it wasn't always fun, but I kept through."

Arnold was in charge of hundreds of students during his tenure at Claremont McKenna. Of

those students, he swore in 62 new Army officers.

Lt. Andrew Smith, a Cal Poly Pomona graduate who was under Arnold's command last year, said he found Arnold's military knowledge and personal advice most helpful.

Smith and his wife have a 2-month-old son and he was concerned about heading into a military career. Conversations with Arnold and watching him interact with his family and two teenage children helped persuade Smith to join the Army's Airborne troops, he said.

"We talked a lot about family expectations, parent expectations and what a military career offers someone with a family," Smith said.

Arnold graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1979. His service included stints in Germany and Bosnia.

Arnold will remain in Claremont. He has taken a post with Claremont McKenna's Kravis Leadership Institute, where he will take leadership students on off-campus field trips and other activities outside class, institute director Ron Riggio said.

Arnold promises to stay attached to his military roots. He plans to watch the Army-Navy football game as usual this year.

"That's the one college football game I never miss," he said. "And I always say Army is going to win, even till the last second before it's over."